



VERIS RFP Project Site Visit and Interview Notes

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General Information

Topic: Day in the Life

Hopper Processing

Usability and efficiency

When processing registrations in the hopper, the system always goes back to the home screen once an item in the hopper is processed. The General Registrars (GRs) would prefer the system present the next item in the current hopper to process. Returning to the home screen is non-intuitive, not consistent with their workflow and adds time to the overall process. On a positive note, the GRs appreciated that there are distinct hoppers for different processes which allows them to focus on a set of specific tasks.

Absentee requests

There are registrations in the Paper OAB Hopper that have priority, that are incomplete, but until 45-days before the election and the signed paper form arrives, there's little the GRs can do.

DMV registrations

The DMV Hopper often has a large number of duplicates—voters who are already registered and have no changes—for the number of applications that come in. This seems to be due to the naïve matching and scoring algorithm the system uses to compare existing records with the records being produced by the DMV.

Restoration processing

In order to process records in the Felon Hopper, the GRs check the Secretary of the Commonwealth's site to see if rights are restored. The Corrections data in VERIS is often stale and sometimes confusingly conflicts with the Secretary of the Commonwealth site. For out-of-state convictions and restorations, GRs end up doing additional research of their own to try to understand restoration law in the original state and follow appropriate procedures.

Absentee ballot management

The GRs had concerns about how the system would accommodate the new 7-day, no-excuse, in-person absentee voting period, which goes into effect in 2020. Some GRs noted that it takes about 15-20 minutes to process an absentee voter. If more voters take advantage of this voting method, this is an unsustainable change to their workload. Using ePollbooks to check in the voter, other offices have reduced the process to about 4 minutes. After ePollbook check-in, the GRs scan the voter's absentee



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ballot request into VERIS using the barcode. This significantly cuts down on processing time, but not all offices have access to ePollbooks.

Election management

The GRs said VERIS is basically just a tool for voter registration and an information storage location for elections, but it is not a holistic, comprehensive solution for election management. It is only a storage spot for static forms, without search or modification capabilities, so it is not useful to them. The GRs would like VERIS to be a fully-featured election management tool to manage all of the ancillary election processes to voter registration that they currently do outside of VERIS.

Externalized processes

Not all election management can be done in VERIS and the feeling from the localities was that VERIS should cover all election management functions. Some GRs noted that VERIS has pollworker management capabilities, but the functionality doesn't entirely fit their needs or use case. Instead, they externalize the process using spreadsheets.

Pollworker management

Pollworker management happens in Excel spreadsheets outside of VERIS. The GRs would like to be able to manage the pollworker process within VERIS, including identifying voters as pollworkers. VERIS was initially built with a pollworker management module, but it was never built out or activated.

Election Results and Election Night Reporting (ENR)

The GRs appreciated the flexibility to post results by precinct or by office. Performing data entry is fairly straightforward, but the massive number of small form fields has little in the way of usability and consideration for election staff users who are overtired.

There is also a required provisional turnout report in VERIS and the GRs do not know what it is or why they do it. They guessed that it could be due to state requirements or EAVS reporting requirements from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. This report does not provide any value to them. The report has prepopulated zeros as defaults, however, the locality must manually enter new zeros even if the answer to any field is zero (i.e. the prepopulated zero is not a convenience feature). Additionally, a user cannot tab from field-to-field within this form making it challenging to fill out.

One GR noted that they will email or print an election results report as a courtesy to interested parties (e.g. interested citizens, candidates, campaigns). The breakdown by the state ENR site is not structured in the way these individuals want it—by precinct within the county—so the GRs feel it is their obligation to provide it.



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Some GRs noted interest in streamlining the collection process on election night such as allowing results uploads directly to VERIS from the precinct. Other GRs noted that, even if this was a possibility, some areas of the locality have little-to-no connectivity which would make implementation difficult to impossible.

Reports and Correspondences

The GRs said one of their most desired features is ad hoc reporting. They have a massive list of reports that have been “built” in VERIS for every different request as different offices want to see information in different ways for purposes of their work. Reports have been added regularly—but rarely culled—resulting in an unwieldy list. Some reports even carry individual names (e.g. Sally’s report) showing the individualized nature of some of the reports.

Document scanning

File system space

The GRs understand document storage space on VERIS fills up quickly. This is a huge problem for ELECT and, ultimately, for them. The GRs would prefer a better way forward without simply purchasing additional server space from VITA. If the system hits the file system space ceiling, VERIS users are randomly ejected from the scanning process. The GRs felt that ELECT should have considered that storage would have been an issue from the initial VERIS creation.

Scanning throughput and processing

Some GRs can get 34 files scanned into one batch file at 600 DPI. Some GRs said they were early adopters of scanning and saving as TIFF files. At some point, VERIS tried to automatically convert the TIFFs to PDF and degraded the quality. While the original files were of high quality, the converted PDFs now have poor resolution and are nearly unreadable.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Some GRs expressed having access to a wonderful GIS system. The GRs remarked that ELECT should provide GIS capabilities in VERIS, since many localities lack GIS support either in their offices or in other local agencies.



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Security

Funding and priority

The GRs expressed that they do not want their offices or their localities to be the “weak link” on security for the Commonwealth. All GRs would like to have a dedicated security/IT resource for their office, however, they do not have the budget for dedicated security and/or IT resources. Some GRs have access to a shared county resource. However, elections do not take priority, even on election day, when the shared resource also supports first responders and public safety agencies (e.g. Fire, EMS, Police). County IT is the only option for support for the elections offices, but the county’s resources are also limited. The GRs do not feel this limited support is enough with how technical elections have become and what is expected of them regarding IT and election security.

Outdated and insufficiently-protected equipment

Due to budget constraints, some GRs lack any antivirus software protection on the computers in their offices and rely on a “strong firewall.” However, they need additional funding to better secure their voter record information. Some GRs have purchased antivirus software themselves for their office computers with the permission of their county IT. Some GRs reported getting phishing attacks at their offices.

One locality purchased new computers five years ago for their office with the expectation that the machines would only last three years. Some GRs still have Windows 7 systems, which Microsoft no longer supports, so the GRs feel their systems are vulnerable.

Training

The GRs expressed that they want to be secure, but IT and security are not their areas of expertise. Training dollars are limited to non-existent for security and IT. ELECT provides cybersecurity instruction that focuses on topics like password security and phishing. However, ELECT does not train localities on developing security plans or the elements that should be included, but expects them to put together security plans for their offices. However, this line showed up in the minutes from a recent county meeting:

HB2178 State Board of Elections to develop security standards for safety and security of VERIS; Electoral Board to develop plans and procedures to uphold the security and submit the plan by March 1, 2020.

With regard to VERIS security, the GRs said they wonder if it is secure, but do not have any insight into how secure it is as it’s not their field of expertise.



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Citizen Portal

The Citizen Portal should require all the necessary fields to be registered to vote and completely eliminate the Paper OVR Hopper. The OAB process also should require the DMV/state ID, since that is a requirement to process the application (for signature). Election officials waste too much time tracking down voters who have entered incomplete or incorrect information in the Citizen Portal.

Miscellaneous

VERIS home page

The VERIS home page should contain relevant information only. Old notices clutter the page and have little use.

Voter overview screen

Currently, the voter overview screen contains information that is unhelpful such as NVRA history, district assignment, and every time the voter has had an update to their record. It would be helpful to have a snapshot of the voter that includes:

- absentee status for upcoming election;
- last time voted;
- pollworker status or interest; and,
- most recent alpha card.

Within this snapshot page, useful functions would include:

- absentee check-in with or without the possibility of printing a pre-filled in-person app excluding reason code;
- print voter notice;
- mark for confirmation mailing;
- current incomplete registrations; and,
- a place to add a comment.

Improved search

GRs need to specify the search criteria in the current system rather than have a unified search (NB: there may be a need for specific or advanced searches in certain situations). Even aspects of the search functionality that would potentially save time have issues. For example, barcode scanning searches by SSN by default rather than Voter ID number.



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Funding

One GR said their office put money aside in their budget for new voting equipment every year for several years. Unfortunately, their county took the money the GR's office set aside and spent it on other budget items. This left them as one of the last localities to procure new voting equipment. When they were finally able to purchase the equipment, it came three weeks before the election which left them scrambling to put together and roll out an adequate training program.

Special characters

Special characters could be one of two problems. Either, VERIS does not support special characters (e.g. é, ñ) or elections staff are not trained how to capture them accurately. Creative workarounds cause even more issues. If a voter with a middle name "Renee" turned in a paper registration form, the GR staff may capture the name as Renee with a trailing apostrophe—"Renee'"—or omit the diacritic mark entirely—"Renee." This is problematic for properly capturing people and address names within VERIS, which, in turn, causes issues in searching for and matching voters.

VERIS structure

VERIS is a relational database, but behaves strangely. It appears to be modeled after a mainframe system as multiple searches are required to perform a particular function. Since VERIS is often criticized for being slow, the GRs see these multiple lookups as a waste of time. To them, it feels like VERIS is a conglomeration of multiple systems rather than one built as an all-inclusive and seamless system.

Electronic pollbook history

The GRs said that ELECT tried to build an electronic pollbook pre-2016, and localities gave input as they were asked to participate. After providing input, they were shown a demo that looked nothing like what was expected by the localities after sharing their input – and the electronic pollbook never worked and was never used in Virginia localities.

Visibility of voters

All GRs can see all voters in Virginia, regardless of locality, but they cannot touch or make modifications to records outside of their locality (e.g. change addresses, issue an absentee ballot). The GRs like this functionality in VERIS and think this is set up well.

Save & next functionality

The GRs would like to see more "save & next" functionality—similar to the desired functionality in the hoppers—in all areas of VERIS, so they can stay on the same voter without relying on the need to continually search for the same voter again.



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Thumb drives for electronic pollbooks

Thumb drives and electronic pollbooks are problematic for the GRs from a voter management standpoint. With the introduction of no-excuse absentee voting, the GRs are worried about keeping all ePollbooks in sync, especially without remote access to VERIS. In satellite locations, using the internet with electronic pollbooks is problematic from an overall security standpoint. Some satellite locations may not even have connectivity making remote access an impossibility, regardless. They are hoping for guidance from ELECT on this.

DMV

The GRs said the DMV focuses on the mailing address, which could be a P.O. Box, rather than the physical address for the voter which the GR offices need. DMV does not capture the physical address that is needed by the GRs so research/follow-up with voters is often required by the localities for DMV registrations. This also causes GRs to deny many otherwise valid voter registrations that contain P.O. Boxes. The GRs would like additional collaboration between ELECT and the DMV. Due to the volume of registrations that come from the DMV, this issue is a significant pain point for the localities.

Merge functionality

Sometimes a voter registers twice and there is a duplicate registration report that shows these records. There is a Merge Hopper that holds these records. Sometimes, someone—either voter or GR staff—makes a mistake when manually entering social security number, so certain duplicate registrations are not immediately caught. The GRs said there needs to be a “true” merge process of records, similar to how it works on mobile phones with regard to merging various contacts lists. VERIS needs to look across all fields for a specific record and GRs should be forced to pick one record or the other. The GRs would like to choose how to merge. The current merge process is destructive. When merging, some of the documents from the “source” record are deleted or lost.

Felonies

The process is very confusing regarding restoration of rights. The Secretary of the Commonwealth’s website is the official place of information for felonies and whether voting rights have been restored for a felon. However, what is there is not always reflective of what is in VERIS, or information the voter tells the locality. Also, rights being restored is based on the laws of the states where the felonies are committed according to the localities. There is no place in VERIS to track in which state a felony took place. The localities feel they have to do too much investigative research which is not an election official’s role. This is not a total VERIS issue, but a pain point for the localities nonetheless. There is too much room for interpretation for restoration of rights for felons, and the GRs are not comfortable with that.



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Handling of addresses

If mail is returned because of an invalid physical address, there is no way to mail a confirmation letter to the voter at a mailing address if the physical address is not fixed. They cannot update a voter's record until the address is fixed.

VERIS checks against the USPS for address standardization, but, sometimes, the official Virginia address conflicts with the USPS data. GIS systems allow for alternate spellings of street addresses, however, VERIS currently lacks this capability.

Petitions

There is an issue with the search function in VERIS not finding the person. The search may be able to be improved to find common permutations of names (e.g. Bill and Billy for William). Adding pages to a petition is a common process, so submitting a required comment for every added page is a cumbersome process. The required frequent updates to the master petition record is a source of frustration.

Menu system

The GRs noted that it is difficult to navigate deeply-nested "fly out menus," which take a significant amount of dexterity to navigate. The sheer volume of options in the menu system is daunting to new and veteran users making it difficult to locate seldom-used features.